

The Light of the World

September 3, 2021

I had a conversation one time with a friend who considered himself basically Christian but dabbled in Zen, and he asked me: “What is it that Buddhists believe?” “And,” he added, “don’t say something vague like ‘Dhamma.’” He wanted something specific, so I told him something specific: We believe that the Buddha was awakened. That’s an event that has implication for our lives, many implications. The Buddha showed that it is possible through human effort to find true happiness. In fact, it’s the people who hold themselves to high standards in their pursuit of happiness who lie at the forefront of the human race. They’re the ones who bring progress, because they bring hope into the world: It is possible to find a happiness that’s not subject to conditions, not going to be subject to the economy, not subject to the environment, not subject to the whims of the rich and powerful, something that every person can find within him or herself.

We also believe that the wisdom of the Buddha’s awakening is the highest expression of wisdom. As he said, wisdom or discernment begins with a series of questions: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and pain? What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What’s unskillful, what’s blameworthy? What’s skillful, what’s blameless?” What’s wise about the questions about long-term welfare and happiness *vs.* long-term harm and pain is the realization that long-term happiness is possible, that it comes through your actions—and of course, with happiness, long-term is better than short-term.

It’s from that question that the Buddha set forth three perceptions that are useful to know as you’re checking on anything to see if it really counts as a worthwhile happiness. One, is it constant or inconstant? If it’s inconstant, of course, it’s not going to be long-term. Two, is it easeful or stressful? If it’s stressful, then it’s not going to be happiness. Three, if something is inconstant and stressful, then why identify with it as you or yours? That relates to, “What when *I* do it will lead to *my* long-term welfare and happiness?” Most people are content with relatively long-term or relatively happy happiness, but the Buddha wanted an absolute. He wanted a happiness free from aging, illness, and death, a happiness free from all conditions, free from all restrictions, even the restrictions of space and time. And he found that it is possible to find that happiness. That’s why he taught those three perceptions, for us to make our standards as high as his.

As you're practicing, you want to apply them to anything that comes up. You say to yourself, "Might this be my happiness?" Well, no, it's inconstant. Then in that case, no. "All right, is it stressful? It's outside of my control." Then why hold on to that as your happiness? Try to look for something better. Hold yourself to high standards, too. That way you're being true to your heart, and you're also a good example to the world. As I said, it's the people who hold themselves to high standards like this in the pursuit of happiness that show that it is possible for human beings to find a happiness that's blameless. In other words, it harms nobody. And it's skillful: The effort you put into it is more than repaid. So, whatever you do in that direction is for your benefit and for the benefit of others.

In other words, you go all the way. You want to keep that as your direction.

This is why the Buddha began the practice with generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill, because these are harmless ways of finding happiness. They may not be totally able to bring you to the deathless, but they are conducive. At the very least, they're a form of happiness that's harmless. You harm no one when you're generous; you harm no one when you're virtuous. Finding well-being with thoughts of universal goodwill causes no harm at all. This is very different from the happiness defined by the world in terms of gain, status, praise, physical pleasures.

Happiness of that sort usually means that when somebody gains, somebody else has to lose. It's because of the pursuit of that kind of happiness that there's so much trouble in the world. As the Buddha said, it's through our fascination with sensuality that there are quarrels within the family, quarrels within society, and wars between nations, whereas an act of generosity doesn't create any conflict at all.

In observing the precepts, there may be some people who are unhappy that you're observing a particular precept, but you're not harming them. And of course, with goodwill, there's no poison in goodwill at all. It teaches you to overcome your likes and dislikes, and to wish for the well-being of all, regardless of whether you like the person or not, regardless of that person's past.

Think of the case of Angulimala. He had killed hundreds of people, yet the Buddha saw that he had potential. Rather than just leaving him to his fate, the Buddha was able to teach the Dhamma in such a way that Angulimala wasn't going to have to suffer in the lower realms. A lot of people were unhappy with that because, literally, he was getting away with murder. But then you take their desire to see him punished, and you compare that with the Buddha's goodwill to see him escape, regardless of what his past was: That's what goodwill means.

A lot of harm is done in the world by people who want to see justice done through punishment. But if you can find a way that people can learn how to behave skillfully and stop doing unskillful things, that's much better than just punishing people, because punishment doesn't go very far. Some people learn their lesson from punishment, but a lot of people don't. By thinking of the true well-being of others, you're fostering your own well-being too. You're making your mind a much larger mind, a mind like a Brahma. Which may not be the ultimate, but it's much better than the normal human mind.

As you're able to develop that expansive state, you may begin to notice exactly what is limiting about even that. It's something fabricated, so there is some inconstancy there. There is some stress. That's why the Buddha said that it's not the ultimate. It's not going to be your ultimate welfare and happiness, so you keep on working, keeping the Buddha's awakening in mind to remind yourself that it is possible to find something better.

This is one of the reasons why this is the focus of conviction in the Buddha's teachings, because as you can get to better and better states of mind as you meditate, you might be afraid: "Maybe this is as good as it gets. If I let go of this, there will be nothing, or I'll fall back." But then you remember the Buddha's example: Anything that has the slightest bit of inconstancy, stress, or not-self is not good enough. There must be something better. That's what the awakening holds out as a promise.

It's up to us to decide how far we want to take that promise. Even if we don't go all the way, always keep it in mind as a possibility. Because for people who live in the world without seeing that possibility, it's a very dark world.

As the Dhamma says, the world is swept away. See how many people let themselves get swept away with it. And when there's no one in charge, you see how a lot of people say, "Well, there's nobody to say that what I'm doing is wrong," and they'll do all kinds of wrong. If that's how you see in the world, it's a miserable place to be. It won't inspire you to do anything noble. It won't inspire you to do anything that really is skillful and blameless.

But having the example of the Buddha and the noble disciples, and keeping that example in mind, provides light. As people would say in the time of the Buddha when they heard the Dhamma from him, it was as if someone had brought a lamp into the darkness. All these people who live in the darkness don't realize how dark it is, because they've seen no genuine light. But we see the light of the Dhamma; we see the promise it holds. We should always hold to that as a possibility, always have conviction in that, regardless of how far we're able to go in this lifetime. That promise is what nurtures our goodness, nurtures all the good

things within us. Yet you see far too many people giving up on goodness when they see the darkness of the world. You have to realize that there is some brightness.

It's like water for nurturing your goodness, to help it grow. Think of Ajaan Fuang, orphaned at an early age, not much of education, and not much of a future, and then he met Ajaan Lee. As he told me, it was through Ajaan Lee that he saw the brightness of life.

So always keep that in mind: There is a brightness of life, and as long as there is that possibility, there's always hope, even if you're orphaned and poor. That's what the Buddha's awakening represents, which is why we have conviction in it. And why it is the focus of our conviction, something very specific always to keep in mind.